

TED KOOSER

COTTON
CANDY

Poems Dipped Out of the Air

“That Kooser often sees things we do not would be delight enough, but more amazing is exactly what he sees. Nothing escapes him. Everything is illuminated.”

—*Library Journal*

“Kooser is straightforward, possesses an American essence, is humble, gritty, ironic, and has a gift for detail and deceptive simplicity.”

—*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

“[Kooser] brushes poems over ordinary objects, revealing metaphysical themes the way an investigator dusts for fingerprints. His language is so controlled and convincing that one can't help but feel significant truths behind his lines.”

—*Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Kooser's ability to discover the smallest detail and render it remarkable is a rare gift.”

—*Bloomsbury Review*

“There is a sense of quiet amazement at the core of all Kooser's work.”

—*Washington Post*

“[Kooser] is one of our best poets, and not simply because his style widens the reach of the art form.”

—*National Review*

“Reading Ted Kooser’s poetry is like wearing a favorite pair of gloves. They are so warm and comforting that you cannot weather the world without them.”

—*New York Journal of Books*

“[Kooser] must be the most accessible and enjoyable major poet in America. His lines are so clear and simple.”

—*Washington Post*

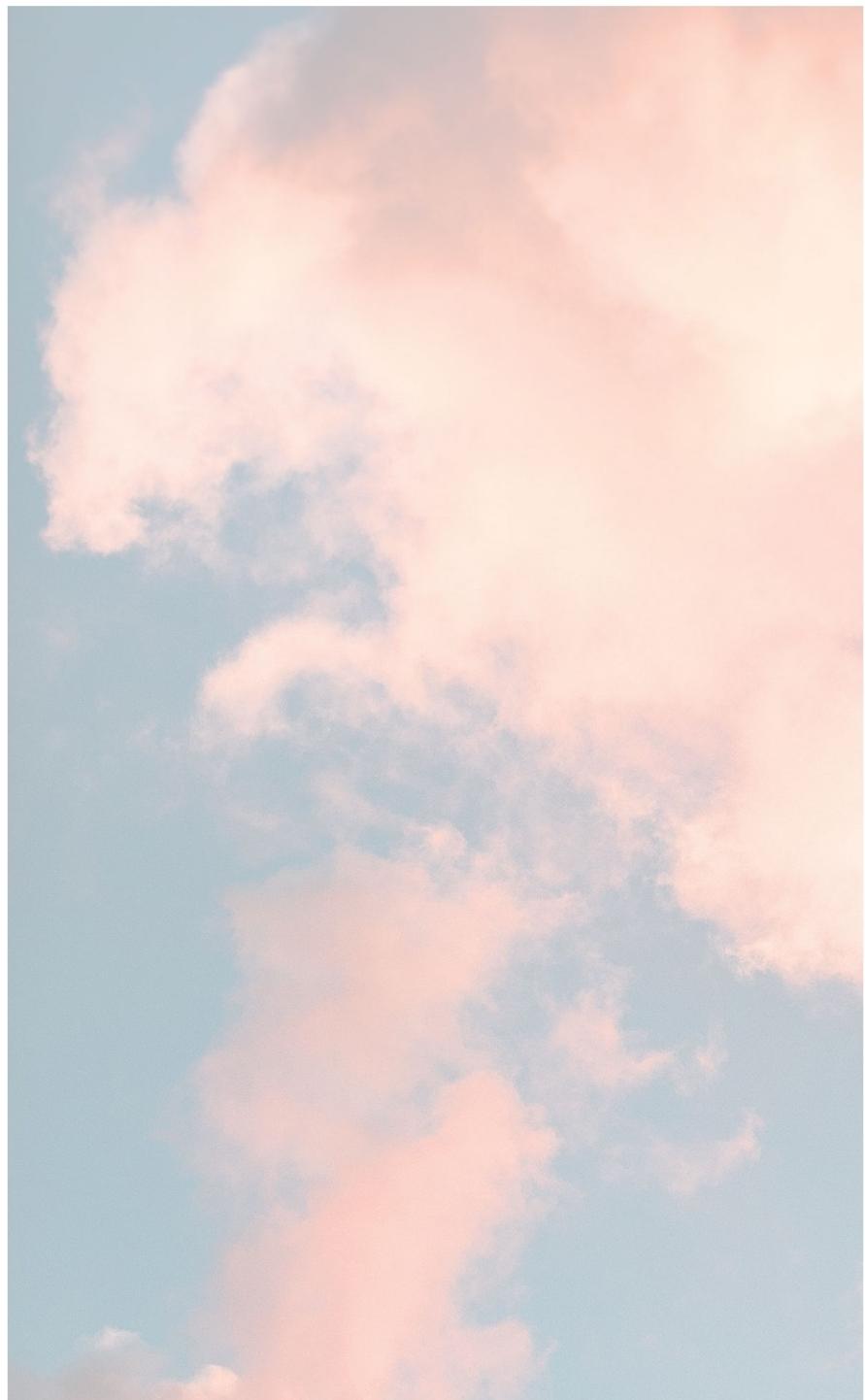
“[Kooser] will one day rank alongside of Edgar Lee Masters, Robert Frost, and William Carlos Williams.”

—*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

“Ted Kooser is an American original whose work in poetry is akin to the paintings of Grant Wood and the music of Aaron Copland.”

—*Kenyon Review*

Cotton Candy



Cotton Candy

Poems Dipped Out of the Air

Ted Kooser

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To the memory of Ruth Rosekrans
Hoffman, who delighted us all.

Contents

Acknowledgments

A Word from the Author

I

Cotton Candy

Spider

A Windy January Morning

Wind in the Chimney

A Light Snow in Late March

Spring

Turtles

Handoff

Culvert

Shadows at Sunset

Clouds and Moon

Toad

Easter Morning

Burning the Prairie

Raindrop

Bucket

As a writing man, or secretary, I have always felt charged with the safekeeping of all unexpected items of worldly or unworldly enchantment, as though I might be held personally responsible if even a small one were to be lost.

—E. B. White, foreword to *Essays of E. B. White*

In a Glade

In Light from a Single Lamp

II

Following the Weather

Rowboat

In May

Harpist

Dandelion

Yellowjacket

A Brief Shower

The Candle's Butterfly

A Kitchen Drawer

A Breezy Summer Morning

A Thump

A Lake of Starlight

Bicycles on Top of Cars

Two Horses

A New Moon

A Sudden Storm

A Walk with my Shadow

In Midsummer

One Cloud

III

- Birdhouse
- A Sighting
- A Sound in the Night
- In a Shed
- A Cloudy Sunrise
- A Novelty
- In a Cold Late-Afternoon Rain
- A Fluttering
- Melon
- A Falling Feather
- A Few Things in Their Places
- A Light in a Farmyard
- A Seascape
- Full Moon
- A Dervish of Leaves

IV

- A Windy Monday
- Egg Carton
- Cornshucks
- A Winter Landscape
- A Leaf in Wind

On a Dark Winter Morning
Pleasures of Snow
An Oriole Nest in Winter
November Snow
After an Ice Storm
A Falling Branch
Fresh Snow, with Deer Tracks
A Man Walking in Deep Snow
Icicle
A Stand of Ornamental Grass
A Special Kind of Sunset

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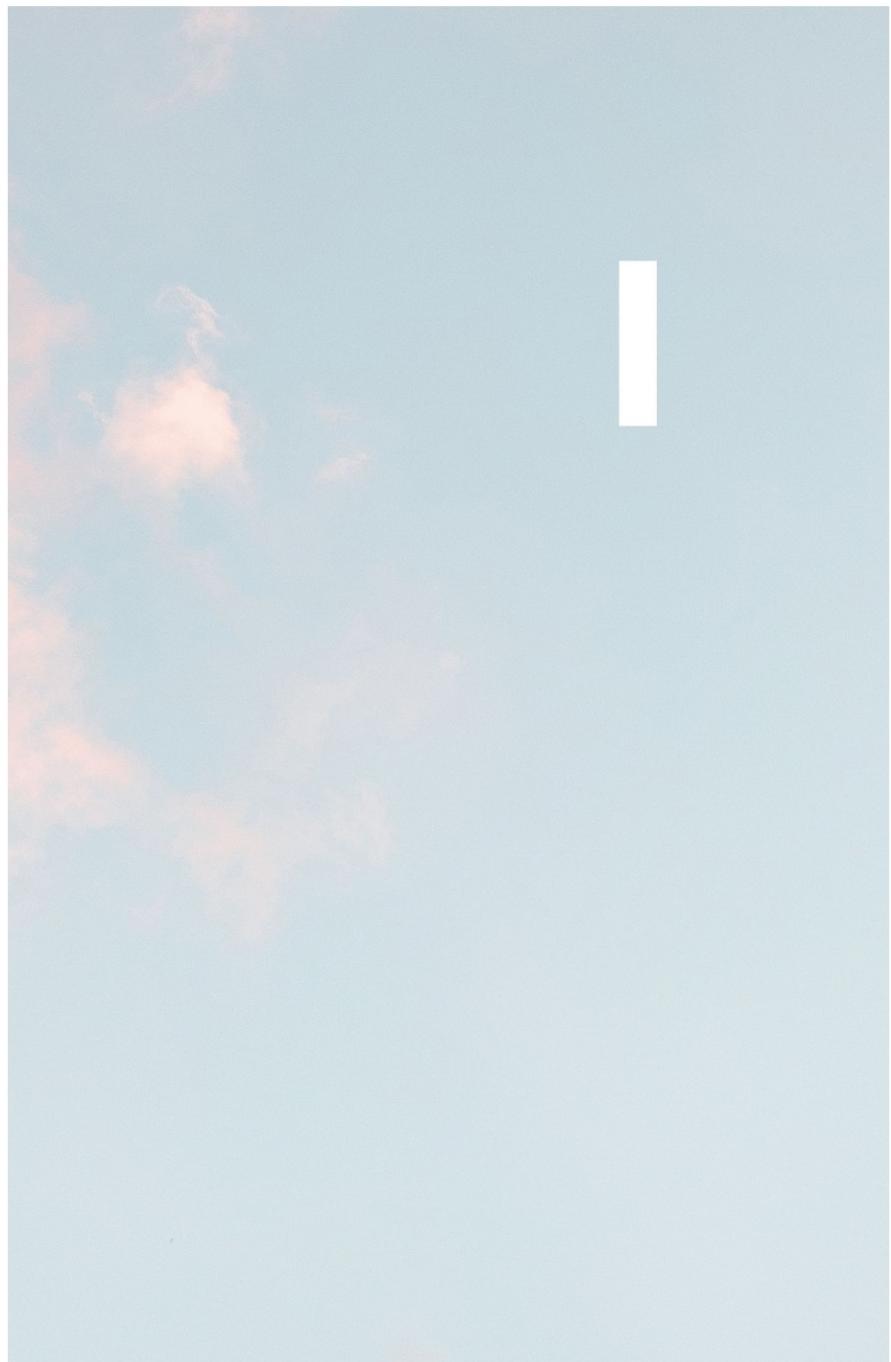
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“A New Moon” in *Ibbetson Street*
“A Falling Feather” in *New Letters*
“Raindrop” and “A Light Snow in
Late March” in *Terrain*
“Bucket” and “A Few Things in
Their Places” in *Split Rock
Review*
“A Brief Shower” in *James Dickey
Review*
“Harpist” in *Marshmallow Clouds*
(Candlewick Press)

My special thanks to Katie Schmid Henson, whose help was invaluable in selecting these poems.

A Word from the Author

My subtitle, *Poems Dipped Out of the Air*, describes the manner in which I've written these poems, a daily routine of getting up long before dawn, sitting with coffee, pen, and notebook, and writing whatever drifts into my mind. Whether those words and images are serious or just plain silly, I try not to censor myself. My objective is to catch whatever comes to me, to snatch it out of the air in words, rhythms, and cadences, the way a cotton candy vendor dips an airy puff out of a cloud of spun sugar and hands it to his customer, who in this instance is you. These poems were written in play and meant to be played with, you and I sharing them, playing together.



Cotton Candy

The vendor, wearing a white
cotton apron,
would select one paper cone
from a big bouquet
of identical cones kept ready in a
bucket
at hand, and, with a grand
flourish, dip it
and sweep it deep in the whirling
pink strands
of warm sugar, and twirl it, this
with the fingers
of just one of his hands, his other
hand held
out of sight, its back pressed to a
bow in the ties
of his apron, and while we looked
on with
delight, he would assemble a
cloud, one cloud
for each of us standing in line
with our quarters,
one quarter per puff of sticky,
spun sweetness,
something to carry away up the
midway, held
by its cone, as if we were
pinching the strings

of small pink balloons that were carrying us.

Spider

Sitting with nothing to do, my
knees crossed,
wagging a foot in the air, I played
a game
with a tiny black spider, quick on
its feet,

like an umbrella blown skittering
in
from the side. It wanted to rest in
the shade
of my shoe, a sizeable cloud to
be under,

and when I would move it, the
spider would run
to get under again. We did this a
long time,
until it got angry or bored, then
hopped back

out onto the light and quickly
blew away
over the floor toward a potted
geranium,
the tips of its spokes scarcely
touching at all.

A Windy January Morning

A whirl of cold, which otherwise would be invisible, has wrapped itself
in snow and leaves and is making a show of toe-dancing under the light
on the porch, then scampering off into
the dark, only to prance back again.
Or are there more of them,
sharing
the same costume, one under the light
while the rest huddle naked and cold
in the folds of the snow-dusty,
black
velvet curtains, awaiting their turn?

Wind in the Chimney

The wind turns and turns in the chimney,
wearing her long black gown, her shawl
of February chill. She is trying to clear the thick soot from the mirrors
using her sleeve, sighing with the effort.
From my bed I can see on the hearth
her hem stirring the ashes.

A Light Snow in Late March

There is a kind of light, thin snow
that the wind can't pick back up
once it has put it down and given
it

a kick and let it unroll across
the lawn, at least a puffy wind
like this one can't, unable to
bend down far enough to get its
fingers under an edge (a fringed
edge on this morning's carpet)
to straighten it a little, although
it's making quite a show of trying,
sensing that someone may be
watching from a nearby window
where, indeed, somebody is.

Spring

Mid-March, and an empty
fertilizer bag,
brown with red and black
markings,
is passing through on its spring
migration.

They're never in flocks, these
solitary
travelers, the dull, blunt face of
this one
like that of an owl, near-sighted,
wings

tattered by fences from flying too
close
to the freshly turned earth, inches
above
its shadow as it stumbles along
over

the clods, while hundreds of feet
overhead, great strings of
hysterical
geese are on their way, too, crying
out,

their entire civilization uprooted,

but sometimes it's trouble
enough getting
from one end of a field to the
other.

Turtles

Each year they appear on an early day
in spring, a line of identical turtles
who have hauled themselves out
of their sleep
in the depths of the winter water,
up onto

the sunny north bank of our little pond,
twenty or more, their shells shiny with chill.

They look like a row of upholstery tacks,
as if they're nailing down the muddy bank

and the hill behind it, a threadbare cushion tweedy with browns and, here and there, a thread of green, with a few small places where the stuffing of snow pushes through,

but a turtle can see a very long way into

the dangers, and if you approach,
plop, plop,
plop, they're right back in the
winter, all
their work gone for naught, the
whole hill
pulled loose along the edge of
the water.

Handoff

Just a few minutes into a thunderstorm,
I saw some trees jostling each other, scrambling for cover, and one of the ones in the lead—
there were several, shoulder to shoulder—without slowing, turned back, and tossed a squirrel to a tree just behind, which bent forward—the squirrel's little legs scrabbling for purchase—and scooped it right out of the air, tucking it under a limb, and they all ran on into the rain.

Culvert

It's just a rusty corrugated pipe
buried under a road with a trickle
of rainwater glinting its way down
a long ditch beside it, making a
turn
toward the opening, shedding
light
from its back as it enters, draping
it
over a hubcap. Inside, the water
pauses and pools before moving
on.

There it can hear for the first time
its own music, as if played on
a xylophone, echoing, echoing.
Haven't you heard it, that solo?
Now that I've brought you this far,
our shoes soaked by the wet
grass,
and have stooped down to show
you
this place where the water plays
for itself a light tune in the
darkness,
you'll be able to hear it forever.

Shadows at Sunset

A soft rain of shadow is filling the
ditches
that flow east from a long row of
fence posts,
each shadow wider the farther
they reach,
with the darkness from each
blade of grass
trickling in from the edges, a
million little
tributaries. Wider but shallower,
too,
with the source at the foot of
each post
muddy black, while far out in the
pasture
the shadow's so thin and watery
that you can
wade right out into it, up to your
knees,
and still see your shoes on the
bottom.

Clouds and Moon

I watched as thin clouds crossed
the moon,
then at its fullest and brightest,
and as they approached they
began to glow,
becoming more than they were
when they'd been little more than
a part
of the great darkness behind
them. Now they
were separate clouds, each by
each
sweeping into and then out of
that circle
of moonlight, perhaps circling
back
when far out from the reach of
the light
so as to pass through again, each
of them
then sweeping away, as if
dancing,
having only one moment alone
with the moon,
and I saw that the hems of their
gowns
brushed up dust, which for only
an instant,

trailed after them into the night.

Toad

This leather bag of dimes goes
hop by hop
over the highway, a motion like
that of
a token in a board game, the little
purse
moved forward a square at a time
as if
making a bid, one toad on offer in
exchange
for something of value hidden in
weeds
in the opposite ditch. Could be a
puddle
of silver, or another few days in
this world.

Easter Morning

A misty rain pushed up against
the windows
as if the house were flying
through a cloud,
the drops too light, too filled with
light to run,
suspended on the glass, each
with the same
reflections: barn and yard and
garden, grayed.

Then, suddenly appearing,
burning in the quince
that soon will bloom, a cardinal,
just one
milligram of red allotted to each
droplet,
but each a little heavier for
picking up
that splash of color, overfilled and
spilling,
stumbling headlong down the
chilly pane.

Raindrop

I saw a raindrop, once, on the
hood of a car
in a used car dealership, just that
one
shining drop, but it had everything
around it
in it, all of the other cars and
pickups,
every red, yellow, and blue plastic
pennant
flapping above it, a row of newly
planted
saplings standing in line by the
highway
with bandaged trunks and saggy
guy-wires,
the whining traffic and the sky
overhead
that was looking more and more
like rain,
four or five swallows darting
within it.
One drop of rain had taken in
everything,
and there was my face, though a
little
distorted, one flat white cheek
pressed up

Burning the Prairie

There's a small puff of smoke
miles away
where the sky, like a lid, has been
lifted a little
by whatever's been brought to a
boil.
It's a farmer who's bringing the
green back,
burning thatched grass, and his
smoke
lifts away, black and brown, and
then whitens,
and thins, and is gone. And then
there's another
in another direction, white as a
milkweed seed
drifting along the blue edge, then
dissolving
in light. There are times when it
feels right
to be able to look at a world far
away,
yet to be part of it, both feet on
the ground.

Bucket

I stood by the flooded Missouri,
a mile wide and varnished with
light,

and a five-gallon white plastic
bucket
floated past, riding deep in the
water,

three or four gallons inside,
its wire handle leisurely sunning
itself

on the rim, and I was delighted:
The water a bucket might carry

for decades, will, when requested
to,
pick up the bucket and carry it on.

against that curving window,
peering out
at all of the world and all that was
in it,
from the inside out, for the very
first time.

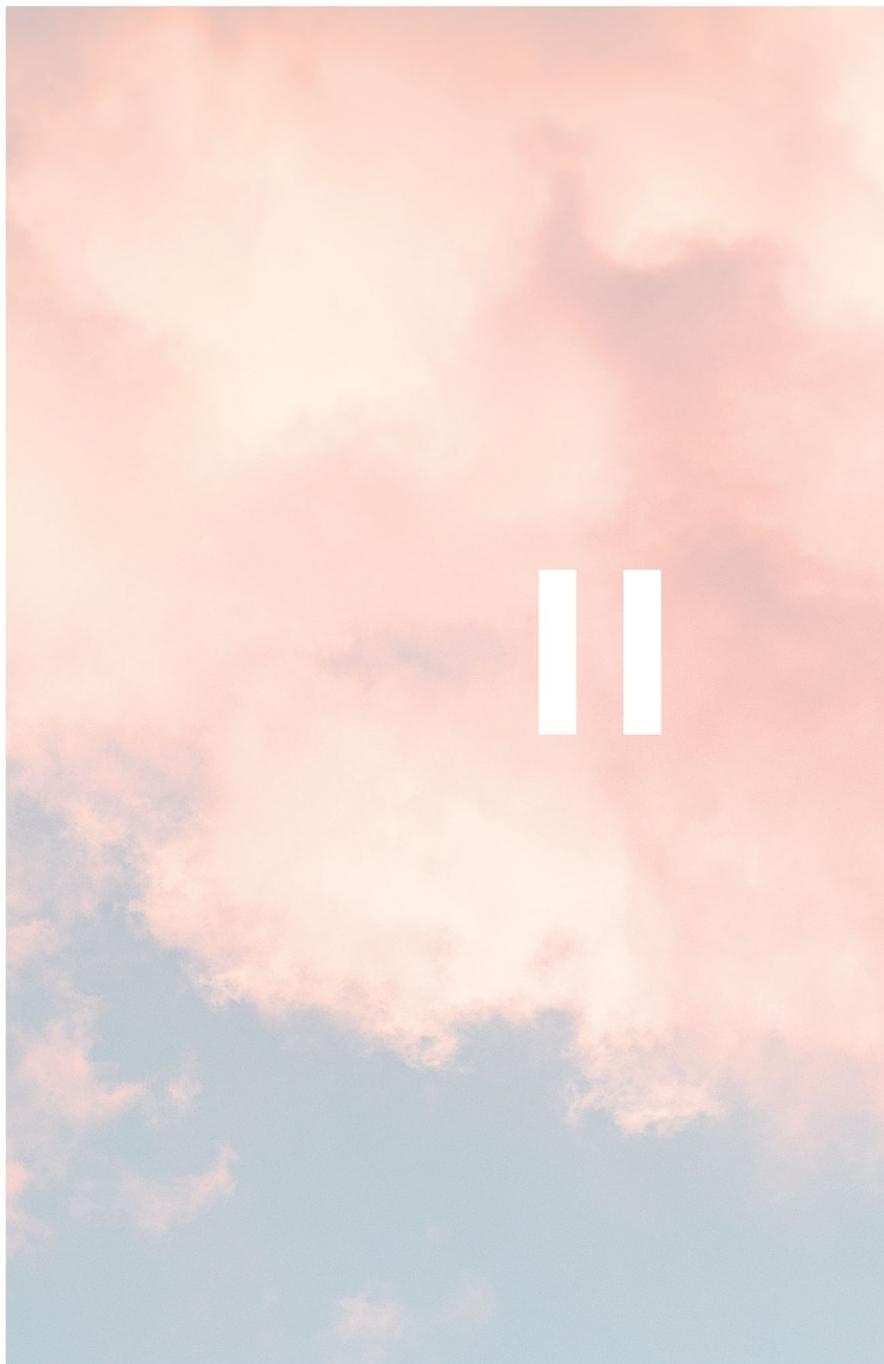
In a Glade

You have to tiptoe close to see
them,
these little goldfish spots of
sunlight,
glittery, swimming under the
trees.
It's not as if they're looking for
food
for not one rises to lip at the blue,
but, rather, they're darting this
way
and that, a school of light
flashing,
because, high above, a breeze
paddles
around in a clumsy inflatable
cloud,
playfully dabbling its fingers.

In Light from a Single Lamp

Against a bright wall, a white moth and her shadow are dancing, fluttering into each other's embrace and then pulling apart. With each failed attempt she leaves dust from her wings on the surface, though it's a dust darker than she, and could well be from the gray, tattered wings of the shadow.

Again and again they struggle together, frustrated, batting each other all down the wall to the floor, where they lie for an instant, together, exhausted, till she gathers herself, flutters up into the light, and he follows.



Following the Weather

Today, on a country road, I found
myself
driving behind the shadow of a
cloud,
a mere puff of a cloud with a
shadow
almost as wide as the gravel, the
wind
at our backs as we both rolled
south,
the shadow out a hundred yards
ahead,
not raising any dust, and as I'd
drive
onto the brief stretch of road that
it
had passed over just a moment
before,
the coolness it kept tossing out
into
the ditch blew in through my
windows,
fragrant with spring. It seemed to
be
a stranger of a shadow,
unfamiliar
with my part of the world, not
knowing

to slow down on the hills, to pull
over
far to the right. I kept a safe
distance,
wary of what might be coming up
the other side of the day, maybe a
far
darker shadow, speeding up out
of
wherever we thought we were
going.

Rowboat

It makes a good ear for a pond,
and it's shaped like an ear. Reach
out
from the dock and set your
minnow
bucket in it and the water will
hear it
right to the bottom, where turtles
will lift from the mud like the
heads
of automatic sprinklers and
paddle
away. Then there's the thunk of
your
tackle box, soon followed by the
creak
of your boots on the slatted floor.
Squeaking the oars into the oar
locks,
you'll never be quiet enough.

Then
one good pull and you're
skimming
out over what you think is a
silence.
Every fish and his uncle can hear
you.

In May

That morning was overcast,
sprinkling rain
on a wide path of rippled, silvery
light
that came toward me over a lake
from a gap
in thick pines on the opposite
shore.
I could see what appeared to be
little fish
lapping the surface at my end of
that path,
then more rings and ripples,
farther away
until they were lost in the glare. I
knew this
was only rain pattering onto the
water,
though I couldn't see the drops,
only the rings
they made, so many, too many to
count,
and, delighted, I began to imagine
drops
falling not down but up, from
beneath that
bright path, thousands of
raindrops rising

like minnows to feed on whatever
 lay
sprinkled over the length of that
 light,
having no taste for the water that
 lay dark
to both sides of the path, not one
 ripple
appearing—or which I could see—
 beyond
those on the light passing over
 the water.
I stood alone, feeling the rain on
 my lips,
watching thousands of silver
 rings spread
out and over that path, on a day
 right-
side-up for one moment, upside-
 down
for the next, back and forth, two
 bright
mirroring worlds with me
 standing
between them, trying to hold on
 to both.

Harpist

She has taken a great golden
moth
into her arms, and with both
hands
she keeps its wings pressed
closed
to keep it from flying away.
And now she is drawing it closer
and smoothing the veins in its
wings
as if to comfort it or give it
pleasure,
and the dust that she brushes
away
sprinkles into the circle of light,
tinkling as if it were music.

Dandelion

The first of a year's abundance of
dandelions
is this single kernel of bright
yellow
dropped on our path by the sun,
sensing
that we might need some marker
to help us
find our way through life, to find a
path
over the snow-flattened grass
that was
blade by blade unbending into
green,
on a morning early in April, this
happening
just at the moment I thought we
were lost
and I'd stopped to look around,
hoping
to see something I recognized.

And there
it was, a commonplace
dandelion, right
at my feet, the first to bloom,
especially
yellow, as if pleased to have been
the one,

chosen from all the others, to
show us the way.

Yellowjacket

The weight of a single
yellowjacket—
about a fifteenth of a gram—is
enough
to make an overripe apple drop

from a branch, and every
yellowjacket
knows to jump off those trap
doors
in time, to hover nearby and
watch

as the apple grows smaller and
smaller,
plummeting down though a shaft
of tart,
cidery air, bouncing just once,
settling

into the grass with the others.

Only then
does the yellowjacket follow,
slowly,
as if in descending a long spiral
staircase,

casually whining its way down,
while
brushing the blue crystalline
walls
with the fancy lace gloves of its
wings.

A Brief Shower

Just an hour before dawn, not
much of a storm,
more like a quarrel between two
neighbors
over some ancient slight,
lightning slamming doors,
then, in a moment, yanking them
open again
to shout out one more curse, light
splashing out
onto the sidewalks, and when at
last the street
went quiet, at its far eastern end
a fresh morning
was lifting the lid on the hive of it
all, peering
under, wearing a hat with a veil of
light rain.

The Candle's Butterfly

I waited a minute for its wings to
close
before picking it up, that orange
butterfly
of flame, but it died in my fingers
as soon
as I pinched its wings together,
and I saw
its soul escape, a delicate smoky
swirl
that slowly ascended, then
disappeared
into the shadows just under the
ceiling.

A Kitchen Drawer

Drawers like this may hold other worlds, but they vanish the instant they're exposed to the light. No one gets more than a glimpse of what's there, maybe a melon-ball maker still holding a cold scoop of light from the other side.

A Breezy Summer Morning

Nothing better to do, I sat and
looked on
while young trees played in the
shallow end
of the pool of the wind, splashing
each other
with handfuls of leaves, the light
in spatters
as they spanked and scooped it,
laughing
as only trees laugh, more like a
chuckle.
Such wistfulness I felt in
watching them,
remembering, having once been a
tree
myself, finding enough to be
happy about
wherever I happened to stand.

A Thump

On a hot summer day you can
hear the sun
pound once with the big heel of
its hand
on the doors of a long line of
boxcars at rest
on a siding, the steel cooling then
warming,
thumping at random, as if to let
the shadows
locked up inside know it would be
foolish
to try to escape, though anyone
can see
that already a few have slipped
out, dropping
through cracks in the floors of the
cars
on handmade ropes of darkness.
If you look
you can see them behind the big
wheels,
ready to run when a cloud passes
by.

A Lake of Starlight

It's not just a light from above,
like a weaker moonlight, but more

like a lake in which each tree,
each person out walking alone

is suspended, all of us floating
in place like specks of dust,
though

somehow passing through, which
is,
of course, the manner in which

our planet is held up to the stars
by the stars. It's not a wonder

we sometimes feel buoyant,
wading out into this light.

Bicycles on Top of Cars

Often in pairs, they fly the
freeways sparkling,
tethered by bungee cords. Above
us
they sail on tiptoe, balanced on
wobbly thin tires,
clenching their handlebars out
before them
in a glitter of chromey knuckles.
Through the bellow
of traffic, through fields of corn,
through the mist
of mountain passes, on they fly.
See the glint
of their perfect teeth, hear them
trying to whistle.

Two Horses

They seem to be made of a light
like that which falls on flowing
water,
and each is aware of the other's
every breath, of every ripple
rolling away from the tiny splash
of a fly, for it seems they are as
one,
each a part of the other, held by
something between them
as they graze, turning and turning,
looking into each other, afloat
on a swollen, green current of
meadow,
passing under the bridges of
clouds.

A New Moon

A new moon, like a willow leaf,
was falling through the stars,
and as I watched, it caught on
something high above. Just then
time stopped for both of us,
moon-leaf and me below it,
as it hung there for what seemed
always in a web of constellations.
And when I felt to see if I was
still alive—it took a moment—
I looked down and saw beside
the boat I'd borrowed, drifting on
a current into time, a leaf just like
the one above, and it was moving,
too, as if to follow me along,
the water starry all around it.

A Sudden Storm

We nosed our house into a
carwash of rain,
and immediately a peal of
thunder jerked us
forward, and all of the lights went
off and on
and off again, and a blinding
downpour
rushed out of a rack of slowly
rolling clouds
just as the rotary brush of our
spirea bush
began to slap at the window,
passing by,
then passing again, still slapping.
We'd paid
with a few minutes of our day for
the Deluxe
but were given an upgrade to the
Ultimate,
including an underbody wash—for
the cellar
got wet—and we also were
entitled to a free
clear-body finish, with a glittering
beading
of hail. Then, suddenly, all of the
roaring

stopped, and the lights came on
again,
and we could see the sun far out
ahead,
and after a pause, as if taking a
deep breath,
the blowers came on and we
were rolled out
dripping a little, into the rest of
the day.

A Walk with My Shadow

Late one afternoon, I walked a
long way
following my shadow, both of us
headed east with the sun at our
backs,
and the farther we walked, the
harder
I found it to keep up with him, as
he
stretched out his legs and strode
on,
so that after a while he was gone,
into
the darkening woods, and I was
alone,
finding my way in pale evening
light
with no shadow to follow. Then
slowly
a full moon rose out of the trees
up ahead and my shadow came
back
and passed me, not offering a
word
of explanation, and I turned
around
and followed him all the way
home.

In Midsummer

Two hundred feet up, a vulture is
riding
round the rim of a thermal, while
beneath it
the trees try to catch at the hem
of its big
shaggy shadow as it bounds
through and over
their branches, soundlessly drops
to the ground,
and dashes away. It looks like the
vulture
is teasing the trees, the way one
would play
with a kitten, trailing a feather
along on
a string, and here comes that
shadow again!

where I found myself moving my
head
to slow it, to hold it a few
moments longer
before it pulled free, disappearing
before

floating out onto the third, then
the fourth,
where each time I slowed it a
little,
and then, as if it had never been,
that cloud,

which had for a few seconds
floated over
just one of my mornings, gently
rippling
the glass of my windows, was
gone.

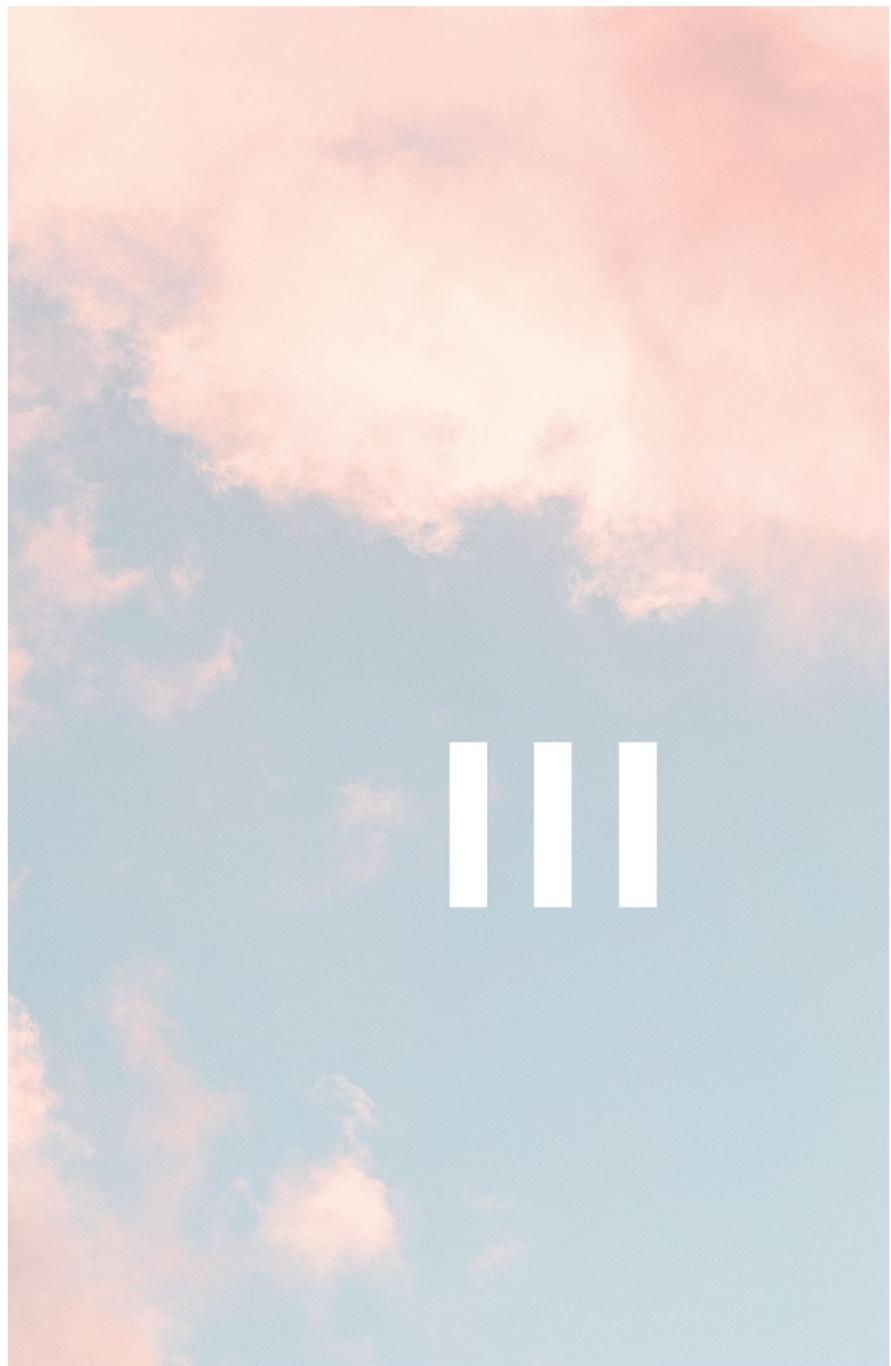
One Cloud

In a room with a high, vaulted
ceiling,
glass all the way up into the
gable,
I watched a cloud pass by four
windows

of identical size, just a puff of
cloud
no bigger than a hand that might
dabble
the smooth blue surface of a
pond

while someone else rowed, the
only cloud
on an otherwise clear blue
autumn morning,
drifting into, then out of the first
frame,

and after a brief pause while out
of sight
behind a few inches of wall,
drifting over,
or onto the pane of the second
window,



Birdhouse

The rusty screw-eye had worked
its way
out of the roof, and the house had
dropped
through a shaft in the early
summer air
like an elevator. It had struck the
earth
and toppled, and had lain there
days
before I picked it up—a sodden
weight—
and pried it open, dug out the
moldy nest
of twigs and bits of leaves and
feathers,
and found three tiny, shattered
eggs,
sticky with strings of yoke, and
among them
dozens of ants that I'd disturbed,
each with
an egg of her own, white as a
grain of rice,
and no place, now, to set it down.

A Sighting

I saw an empty black plastic
trash bag
hurrying along a roadside ditch
wearing no more than its flapping
nightshirt,
and this on a cold day in
November.

I was driving in the same
direction
at about the same speed. It
looked as if
it was frantic to get somewhere
on time,
shouldering and pushing its way
through

an invisible crowd which, as if
annoyed,
shoved back, with a few of the
bigger gusts
throwing punches and knocking it
down
though it kept getting up, fighting
for breath

and then stumbling ahead. After
a while

it dropped far behind, and I sped
on my way
while the bag disappeared from
my mirror,
stomped flat by the boots of the
wind.

A Sound in the Night

Hours before dawn I woke to the
sound
of a dog far in the distance,
barking,
with pauses between one bark
and the next,
as if someone were pounding
down nails

that had worked themselves
loose in the roof
of the night and was feeling the
way
nail to nail, star to star. The dog's
bark
was uncertain, questioning: Was
somebody

there, walking past on the Milky
Way,
the footsteps like whispers, so
soft in that
ancient white dust? If it were
someone,
tiptoeing into forever, whoever it
was

hadn't wanted to wake us, but the
dog,
with the sharp, eager voice of the
young,
seemed to enjoy being alive, and
to love
any reason to bark at the
darkness

while that person, or persons
unknown,
passed the dark houses and
closed gates
on the path to tomorrow, or
perhaps,
came back from tomorrow, into
today.

the cheeps falling out of the
shadows.

In a Shed

The head of a hammer is perched
on
two ten-penny nails that it itself
pounded
onto the front of the workbench, a
nest
sturdy enough to bear up for a
while
in the harsh wind of time, like the
others
the swallows have hung on the
rafters
and tucked under the eaves of
the roof,
though today time's a summery
breeze
making the walls squeak a little,
dust
dappled with light spattering
down
through the sun-riddled tin roof,
dotting
the bench, two buckets, one coil
of wire
and a snake snaking over the oil-
blackened
floor, flicking its red tongue,
tasting

A Cloudy Sunrise

The sun was reluctant to get up,
probably knowing too well that
the fields
would be cold underfoot. It lay
there
with a cloud pulled up over its
face,
under a comforter with a border
embroidered with bare trees and
crows.

I put on the kettle for coffee and
fried up
some Jimmy Dean sausage links,
thinking
the smell would entice it, but even
when
the toast popped up with its
coarse
morning cough, the world stayed
dim.

I could feel that the rest of the
day
was losing its patience, for
someone
under the ice on the river had
turned on
soft fluorescent lights, so that the
fish,

who'd stood in line all through the
night,
could get on with delivering
bubbles.

A Novelty

If you drop
the capsule
of a sleeping bat
into a glass
of sunset
it will magically
unfold.

In a Cold Late-Afternoon Rain

In a cold late afternoon rain,
a man with no shirt, wearing
a yellow Day-Glo vest, is pushing
a long, reluctant centipede
of shopping carts across
a puddled supermarket lot,
some of the carts with locked
wheels,
all of them squealing or jingling
from puddle to puddle. His shoes
are wet, his head is bent, his wet
hair
stringy and swinging. His bony
shoulders are blue with tattoos.
It looks as if he's pushing the rest
of his life out ahead, skinny arms
covered with goose-bumps
reaching out toward the future.

A Fluttering

Out walking the checkerboard
edge of a hayfield,
stepping onto, then out of the
patches of shade
from trees that leaned over a
fence I was following,
I saw something ahead, at eye
level, fluttering,
flashing as fast as the clicks in a
bicycle chain,
and thinking that it was alive, I
moved up on it
slowly. But as I grew near I could
see it, a leaf,
pale yellow, caught at the end of
a long strand
of all but invisible silk, let down
from above,
and though it wasn't the butterfly
or the moth
I'd expected, it was doing a
commendable job
of mimicking life, caught up in a
terrible struggle,
so I swept a hand over it,
breaking the silk tie
and setting it free, though for a
few steps it swung

from the cuff of my sleeve as if
wanting to follow,
so, unembarrassed, nobody
around, I spoke to it,
just a few words of assurance,
then let it down
gently, into a shadow, and went
on my way.

Melon

By the time we discovered it
under the vines
it was too ripe to pick, its down
side soft
and leaking bees, so we left it, a
pale yellow,
partly deflated, baggy old
birthday balloon,
though we reeled in the coarse
nets of vine
for the compost heap. All winter
that melon
bobbed like a float in the slow
tides of snow,
losing its color, and by spring it
was hollow,
translucent, a shell from which
something
had pecked its way out and was
gone
like the past, leaving a trickle of
seeds.

A Falling Feather

The bird that had dropped it had
already flown on
by the time I glanced up from my
walk and saw it
a few yards ahead, a white
feather, slowly and carefully

rocking its way, step to step,
down a staircase of air
like a candle in the hand of a
heavy, invisible man
who was hesitant, apparently
fearful of falling,

one of his hands on a bannister,
and in the other
the burning white flame of a
feather as he felt his way
down into the light at the bottom.

All the world

stopped to watch until at last he
bent and carefully
set the flame down in the grass,
where it became
only a feather, undistinguished, a
creamy white

A Few Things in Their Places

A brick on the lid of a beehive,
five tires
weighing down the tarpaper roof
on a shed,
close to a hundred round
thousand-pound bales
holding the prairie flat all the way
out
to its edge and, next to an
abandoned school,
a teeter-totter pressing the tip of
a finger
on something that once
happened there.

with a stain of pale yellow at the
tip of the quill,
though still warm, still fluttering
ever so slightly,
glowing with light that had fallen
so slowly, so far.

A Light in a Farmyard

The night is a tarp worn thin by
hard use,
thrown over the days, thousands
of stars
showing through, especially
where it's been
folded and folded again at the
Milky Way.

One little hole in the fabric has
opened
a few yards away, letting
yesterday—
or is it tomorrow?—leak through,
the canvas
around it so thin that it glows like
a halo.

But it's only an everyday bulb at
the top
of a pole, showing the pole and
below it
a circle of dust. One can see
hundreds
just like it all along the horizon.
But is that
a horizon we see, or the hem of
the night

too loosely staked to the ground?

A Seascape

In September, before the first
frost,
on a wet city street where a
fireman
had flushed out a hydrant, I saw
dozens
of butterflies drinking, little gray
boats
riding low in the water, with
triangular
calico sails, each tugging its
anchor,
their bows pointing into the wind.

Full Moon

Midnight, and the lake is a couple
of hours
into the late shift, standing on
either side

of a long conveyor belt of silver
ripples,
nearly all perfect and the rest
within standards,

the rollers beneath well-oiled with
darkness
and altogether soundless now,
though by dawn

they'll be chirping and crying, the
belt slapping
a little, like wings taking off from
the water.

IV

A Dervish of Leaves

Sometimes when I'm sad, the
dead leaves
in the bed of my pickup get up on
their own
and start dancing. I'll be driving
along,
glance up at the mirror and there
they'll be,
swirling and bowing, their flying
skirts
brushing the back window, not
putting a hand
on the top of the cab to steady
themselves,
but daringly leaning out over the
box,
making fun of the fence posts
we're passing
who have never left home,
teasing the rocks
rolled down into the ditches, the
leaves light
in their slippers, dancing around
in the back
of my truck, tossing their cares to
the wind,
sometimes, when I'm down in my
heart.

A Windy Monday

Much as a gymnast will skip a
few steps
with her hands in the air, then
place them
fingertips first on the floor,
though for only
an instant, then flatten her whole
hand

in the manner a duck puts down a
foot—
but faster than that—and then
jauntily
launch herself, heels over head,
into
a backward somersault, then do it
again,

and then, while flying upside
down, turn
a full twist in the air and land
hands high,
just so, this grocery insert from
yesterday's
newspaper skips out of an alley—
wearing

Egg Carton

This dull gray caterpillar was
much too numb
from its days in the dark
refrigerator
to be able to walk very far on its
stumpy legs,
so here it sits, little more than a
shell of itself,
cracked open, empty on the
kitchen counter,
a bright yellow omelet having
fluttered away.

meat red and carrot yellow—
drops into a roll,
jumps up again, springs from its
fingertips
high over my windshield, flips
once, and is
gone. This poem's a round of
applause.

and scurrying on, leaping from
furrow
to furrow, feeling terribly empty,
or so
one imagines, not giving a
thought to
what's coming, bewailing what's
been,
a few badly hobbled, a few falling
down,
a number hysterical, out of
control,
waving their frostbitten hands in
the air.

A Winter Landscape

As far as I can see, across the city,
quill pens of smoke are dipping their tips
into the inkwells of chimneys,
so many pens ready to write, but not one

of them writing. But just over there
is a house with no pen. The well must have
gone empty. There were probably lots of bad stories, bleak stories, dashed off,

then crumpled and tossed to the winds.

You've seen clouds like those, pale wads
of breath at a shelter where people
wait and wait for a bus. I'd guess nothing

is left in that house with no feather

Cornshucks

If you live in corn country you've
seen them.
They're all on the move now,
October,
blowing out of the harvested
fields,
hurdling wire fences, quite a few
leaping
and rolling like pole-vaulters,
picking
themselves up from the ditches,
scrabbling
over the gravel, out over the
highways,
a few getting caught with the
grasshoppers
on the grilles of the humorless
grain trucks,
the rest leaping into the opposite
ditches,
the grass glinting with overnight
frost,
some lying down to roll under the
low wire,
then springing right up, brushing
the dust
from the sleeves of their
raincoats

but a dusting of snow blown in
under
the door, and a thin skin of dried
ink
lining the walls of the chimney.

A Leaf in Wind

In a light winter wind I watched a
dead leaf
tied to a twig by a short length of
thin stem
behave like a bird, a red-brown
wren-like bird
on one leg, with a fluttery
temperament, facing
one way for a minute, then
turning to peck at
the twig. It was much too cold for
ants to be out
but there was apparently
something quite small
just behind it, doggedly following,
something
that either the leaf didn't like or
that it wanted
to eat, so tiny it made for quite
difficult pecking
while keeping one's balance on
one leg in wind,
bobbing and weaving, with a beak
little more
than a broken-off tooth at the tip
of a leaf.

Pleasures of Snow

First came a freezing mist that
darkened the deck
with a brittle glaze, and soon
what looked like broken rings
of snowflakes spiraled in, though
slowly, a few of them
holding hands, then letting go and
opening their chutes,
and floating down to lean against
each other on the ice.
Then, resting there, they waited
till a breeze would come
from somewhere far across the
early evening dark
and take the hand of one and
spin it out and away, far
to the edge of the light, and a few
of the others would soon
join hands and tentatively follow.

On a Dark Winter Morning

Is that the sound of a car's starter
motor
cranking over and over again in
the cold,
and then, after a few moments
have passed,
trying it again? No, that's the call
of an owl
from a tree somewhere out in the
darkness
on a branch overhanging the
snow.
It has a battery that never runs
down.

An Oriole Nest in Winter

An oriole has left her saggy
evening bag
snagged on a branch, a cheap
accessory
crocheted from hay and orange
baling twine
with beads of blue sunlight
interwoven,
the orange to match her outfit
and the blue
as an accent to pick up the sky
through which
she came and went before she
flew away
to join the snowbirds at their
winter place
where no bird needs a fancy
evening bag,
but rather, like the chickadee, a
simple cap
for sitting by a birdbath with the
others,
having a sip, maybe leaving a
seed as a tip
for the starlings for doing such a
good job
of picking things up, but all of this
is

supposition. All we really have is
a nest
at the end of a twig, a little like a
purse
in appearance, threadbare on a
winter day,
the missing eggs all spent to buy
the future.

November Snow

Snow all afternoon, but lighter
at dusk, and someone has drawn,
as if in soft pencil, a barn on the
side
of the distance, drawn trees, too,
and blurred them with a fingertip,
and blurred the ghost of a house
as if it stood back from the barn.
And as the snowfall lessens
and lightens and night comes on,
I see a dab of glowing yellow
on first one window, then another.

After an Ice Storm

Twenty degrees, and the clouds
so far above, so thin,
that the watery light of eternity
shows through.

Earlier, somebody poured
something too hot in the cup
of the day, the one cup we've
been given, cracking

the glaze, which now is a web of
glittering twigs spread
over the bottom, though some of
the cracks have risen

up the sides like trees branching.
Imagine yourself small,
standing with me on the bottom,
pale light from the sky

porcelain-white all around us, as
glimpsed through
those trees I described, which we
can hear clicking

a little as the crazing continues,
twig touching twig,

a glassy sound all around us,
down inside of today.

A Falling Branch

A branch in a tree outside my door
has broken away from somewhere above
and begun to fall, but a lower branch
has reached to catch it, and the two,
clinging onto each other, dance a last dance
in the wind, a springy waltz with bows
and curtsies, the strong branch teasing
the falling branch, swinging it out and over
its shadow beneath on the snow.

Fresh Snow, with Deer Tracks

Their hooves have broken
through the white
into a shallow, watery blue that's
flowing
into March, and they've kicked up
splashes
ahead of each step that since
have frozen
sandy and white on the crust.
Somehow
the one out in the lead knew how
to skirt
the deeper, colder blues, and you
can see
by now, I hope, how all the others
followed.

A Man Walking in Deep Snow

From a freshly plowed country road, a white canal all the way to the horizon, we see him in insulated coveralls and a cap with earflaps, halfway between house and barn, lifting his knees, then punching them down, his boots never quite clearing the surface of the snow, his arms out wide like a landing hawk, his gloves frantically grabbing for bannisters that aren't there.

It's as if he were wading out into a flood, or trying to stomp out a fire he's started and which now has spread out everywhere and over everything, and though he knows we're here, he's not waving for help. His whole self's going to do this, all on his own,

Icicle

I watched an icicle busily
gathering light
from a warming winter afternoon,
but soon it
was trying to carry too much, and
dropped
one little piece, and then another
and another.

and we speed on and into other territories.

great agitation, shaking their
layered

shoulder-length hair, bobbing and
weaving, some of them arguing,
getting right up into each other's
faces

as if shouting, as if something
quite
shameful has happened,
somewhere
beyond all this, off over the snow.

A Stand of Ornamental Grass

It's one of those decorator winter
days

with a gray dropped ceiling, walls
tastefully painted a silvery off-
white,

hung all around with empty
mirrors

framed by trees, the great room
of it all

lit softly from not too far above by

long fluorescent tubes in fixtures
recessed in the milky, light-
diffusing

clouds, in short, a beauty salon of
a day,

with a stand of ornamental grass

—

soft bleached-blonde seed heads
being blow-dried—and, although

I can't make out what they're
saying,
they're all talking at once, and
with

About Ted Kooser



Ted Kooser, U.S. poet laureate (2004–6) and winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, is an emeritus presidential professor of English at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. He is the author of dozens of books, including *Kindest Regards: New and Selected Poems*, *The Wheeling Year: A Poet's Field Book* (Nebraska, 2014), and *Delights and Shadows*.

A Special Kind of Sunset

You, too, have seen them at
times, those rare sunsets
when the light squeezes in under
a low layer of clouds

and illuminates everything, but
just on the west face—
cut cornstalks in snow, phone
poles and fence posts—

no middle-range dimness, only
gold or black shadows
reaching all the way back to the
morning. What's left

of that day has paused, turned,
and come back, and is
lifting the lid just a little to be sure
we're still there.